

The Miner's Institute

Tara Wepking

Good Shepherd Lutheran School, Collinsville

Teacher: Michael Voss

What truly is the heart of a city? Is it the city center, the library, the schools, or is it a place that the entire city knows and loves? If it is the latter, the heart of Collinsville, Illinois, is most certainly the Miner's Institute, also known as the Miners Theatre. Over the generations, many people have enjoyed the luxuries the theatre provides, whether they had been enjoying a play, movies, or something else. It is one of the few buildings on Main Street people can honestly say they remember vividly.

The architect Robert E. Kirsch from St. Louis designed the building. Local contractor Henry Eberhardt constructed the building. He was the only contractor in Collinsville to bid on the job. It was built in 1918 at a cost of \$138,993, when houses could be built for \$4,000 and architect fees were as low as \$4,891. At the time, however, this was an extravagant cost.

To finance this building, the local miners tithed a portion of their paychecks toward construction. A total of one percent was taken from every willing miner. These were people who lived their entire lives doing hard physical labor without much pay. Miners from three companies donated their pay: Lumaghi mines, Abbey mines, and Hardscrabble mines. To the miners' minds, this would be proof of all of their work, of their efforts. It would be a landmark of theirs to withstand time's test.

The theatre has been used for many things over past decades. Its original grand opening was postponed after World War I due to a world-wide influenza outbreak. During this time, it was used as an overflow center, where the sick could be nursed. It officially opened on Saturday, December 28, 1918. Between 1919 and 1935, the institute was used as a graduation hall for the local high school. The building was in use for many years until it fell into general

disrepair. It was opened again briefly as an adult entertainment facility, but was quickly shut down due to public disapproval.

On August 29, 1985, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in July 1988, a group of concerned citizens created the Miner's Institute Foundation to preserve Collinsville's landmark. The following year, January 13, 1989, the foundation purchased the building and began the restoration process. Live theatre returned the Institute with *Our Town* in October 1990. In the past ten years, the building has received few changes, but one of them is The Wall of Honor. This wall recognizes people who worked in the local coal mines. On October 3, 1993, the Miner's Institute was rededicated with a humongous rededication ceremony, called "The 75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee." The front of the theater underwent renovation in 1995, and in February 1996 new seats were installed. Above the entryway is a beloved statue of two coal miners smiling at each other while shaking hands. Two local miners, Matt Pigford and Alfred Bailey, posed for this.

The building consists of three floors. The exterior of the structure is made of flashed faced hydraulic brick with terra cotta trimmings, which were frescoed with stucco, in a high, artistic style. Bedford limestone, also known as Indiana limestone, lines the windowsills, adding an elegant air. The theater is on the first floor. Meeting rooms are on the second, while a large banquet hall is settled in on the third.

The Miner's Institute is a wonderful example of architecture from the late 1910s to the early 1920s. It is involved with a rich history that many local people can remember. These things are not what made the building so important though. It is the spirit that it sparks in the community, the remnants of the local miners' want for something to remember. The miners put all of their efforts into this building, hoping and wishing that the community would remember them always

through the institute. Their wish, hope, and goal has finally been met. [From “the 75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee Rededication Ceremonies of the Miner’s Institute Building”; student historian’s interview with Robert Clark (former member of the board of directors of the Miner’s Theater), Nov. 5, 2003; Lucille Stehman, *Collinsville, a Pictorial History*; “1996 Historical Homes Tour.”]